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# Symbolism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Title:** Symbolism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Abstract:** The modernists wanted to give as true a picture of the world as possible and experimented with narrative techniques and devices such as stream of consciousness, fragmentation and symbolism, which meant a break with more traditional writing. Symbols have often been used to add a mystical element to works of literature and have always intrigued readers, promising to reveal hidden meanings. This essay, however, is based on the thesis that Virginia Woolf's symbolism in *Mrs. Dalloway* not only is a way to enrich the writing and create an added layer of interest, but is a vital part of the novel and that without the symbolism, communicating central views and ideas to the reader would not have been possible. The focus of the essay is to analyse different categories of symbolism such as characters used to criticize aspects of society, references to nature and objects that carry symbolic meaning, and to find out how symbolism is used to create meaning beyond words in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, symbolism, symbols, categories, meaning, modernism, characters, nature, objects

## Contents

# 1. Introduction

Modernist literature, known for its interesting break with traditional writing, both in terms of contents as well as narrative techniques, remains relevant even though nearly a century has passed from the time of writing. The topics and narrative techniques and the way the modernists saw, or wanted us as readers to see, the world is still very much the subject of study at universities around the world today. We learn about the crisis experienced in a changing society and about the way the modernists wanted to portray the truth with a capital T, through the use of fragmentation, symbolism and metaphors. We analyze and dissect works of literature in order to gain understanding.

Sometimes, students and other readers may be forgiven for wondering if scholars of today, and decades past, perhaps read too much into certain literature in their eagerness to reach beyond the words and, hopefully, find a hidden, obscured meaning. I have found myself asking if it is possible that sometimes in these close readings of texts, like treasure hunts through symbolism and metaphors, meanings are created that were not meant to be.

Upon reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, I became increasingly interested in the rich imagery used and this essay will be based on the thesis that Woolf's symbolism in this novel is not only a way to enrich the writing and create an added layer of interest, but the symbolism used is indeed a vital part of this novel, without which communicating central views and ideas to the reader would not have been possible. I argue that the symbolism Woolf uses in this novel can be divided into two main categories, in terms of function; firstly, symbolism used to put forth social criticism through archetypal characters and secondly, a subtle symbolism used to speak to our senses and subconscious. I therefore strive to find out in what ways symbolism is used in *Mrs. Dalloway* to create meaning beyond words.

Though *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place in London on a single June day, 1923, and centers on Clarissa, a woman in her early fifties, there are many stories told in this novel through different characters and shifts in time. While Clarissa is preparing to host a society party the same night, she walks down memory lane, thinking about her youth and old friends. In a different part of town, however, Septimus Smith is struggling to get through the day, suffering from severe mental illness. At first there appears to be nothing connecting these two main narratives but at the end when Clarissa hears of Septimus's suicide their stories come together as his life, and final act, enter her consciousness. Through the use of symbolism and the method of stream of consciousness, Woolf channels her own thoughts and criticism in fields

such as gender and feminism, psychology and the treatment of mental illness in a changing society recovering from World War One.

The thesis gives rise to a number of questions about the nature of symbolism in the novel and Virginia Woolf's motivation for using it; did she think the symbolism saturating the novel obvious enough for readers to fully comprehend? If not: what could be the reason for the obscurity? Did Woolf perhaps want there to be levels of the novel that were meant only for a privileged few to grasp? Did the times, the post-World-War-One years, maybe call for caution that you could not freely express your ideas and openly criticize society in writing? I will approach these questions even though an exhaustive answer will not be given.

## Method, Secondary Sources and Structure

This essay is based on literature studies. The method I have used is to go from the general to the specific by starting to read about modernism in literature to gain a better understanding of what modernist writers wanted to achieve through their writing and then to read about general symbolism in literature. I then went on to research literary criticism about Virginia Woolf and about symbolism in Mrs. Dalloway, in particular.

The secondary sources I have used include *The Subject of Modernism* (1994), in which Tony E. Jackson writes about the history of literary modernism and the development of narrative techniques. *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* (1965) by N. C Thakur offers a thorough study of symbolism and is interesting, thanks to its being of an early date, which allowed Thakur to interview Virginia's husband Leonard Woolf after her death, providing a direct link to her thoughts and writing. "Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith: An Analysis of 'Paraphrenia' and the Schizophrenic Use of Language" (1981) in an interesting article within the field of psychology and literature, in which Suzette A. Henke writes about the character of Septimus Smith as a portrayal of Virginia Woolf.

I have structured the essay as to firstly, in the chapter "Symbolism and Woolf," aim to give a background to Virginia Woolf's symbolism and gain understanding about her motivation for using it in her writing. In the next chapter, "Characters," I examine how Woolf builds up different personalities to structure her novel. Here, I focus on some of the minor characters in the novel and argue that it is through these that Woolf puts forth her criticism of society. In the following chapter, "The World of Nature and of Objects," I look at a category of symbolism that I believe is used to speak to our subconscious through pictures rather than through regular narrative. Finally, in the "Conclusion," I sum up the different sections of the essay and reflect on my findings in relation to the thesis.

## 2. Symbolism and Woolf

Modernist writers brought a change in how to structure the narrative compared to traditional writing. This plotting as well as the use of metaphors in modernist writing is what Tony E. Jackson discusses in *The Subject of Modernism*. He points out that up to a certain point in literary history authors looked upon narrative only as a way to try to represent the real thing by describing them as realistically as possible, but that modernist writers started to use careful plotting as a tool to determine what was to be perceived as real (115). Jackson writes "with respect to plotting, we will find that a work such as *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals the desire of the plot in a very specific way, a way that will also begin to bring out the problematic status of the artist in modernism" (113). With this new way of writing, the role of the author became more complicated than before. Was the author to be visible as narrator in a story or whose perspective should the author adopt? According to Jackson Virginia Woolf was looking for a narrative shape that would suit her experience; "her experience was […] substantial but unembodied, needing the definition of a shape and yet not of just any shape" (114).

Looking for the right kind of representation of her experience, Woolf wants to avoid writing like her realist contemporaries. These authors, whom she called materialists, irritated her as they were too preoccupied with realistic descriptions. Jackson explains that "in spite of all their attention to the material surroundings and existence of their characters, their work somehow fails to represent what Woolf finds to be the 'proper stuff' of fiction" (115). In the essay "Modern Fiction" Woolf questions the point of reading such material novels as "whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, essential thing, has moved off" (97). Instead she urges the writer to free himself from the convention of realistic writing and instead "base his work upon his own feeling" (Woolf 98). The writer should "look within" and Woolf suggests examining the interesting stream of impressions in "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day"( 98). She seems to find that if one tries to describe things in an objective way, the true story will in fact be obscured, that the life of the story will escape. Jackson sums up that Woolf, however, still "feels that 'life' *can* be represented" and that she desires to do so by using metaphor as a literary tool for structure (115-116).

In order to study this literary tool it is important to first consider some of the related terms. In *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* N. C. Thakur examines how symbolism in *Mrs. Dalloway* is used to portray the despicableness of life, sanity and insanity and the relationship between life and death. Thakur begins by pointing out the fact that the term *symbol* itself means many different things depending on the field in which it is used and that the purpose of

symbols, of course, varies, for example, in logic, semantics or fine arts (1). Thakur refers to early analyses of the Symbolist literary movement and its usage of symbols as a way to add a spiritual, mystical element to the literature, with hidden or unstated meanings (1). In this essay I will use the terms *symbolism* and *symbols* alongside those of *metaphors* and *images*, as these, in my opinion, are interchangeable, and because like Thakur, I wish to focus not on definitions of the terms but on the actual symbols used by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Virginia Woolf was looking for alternative ways to represent reality and working out how to use symbolism in her writing was an important part of this process. In any creative writing it is naturally important to describe persons and surroundings in order to bring life to the characters and setting. Woolf, however, not only paints a picture of the people and settings in *Mrs. Dalloway* by the use of adjectives and descriptive writing but she uses symbolism as a tool throughout her novel. Thakur points out that although Woolf may not have systematically studied symbolism *per se*, there is evidence in her diary and critical essays that she did spend a lot of time thinking about symbolism and studying the running use of metaphor in early literary works, such as Greek tragedies, and from this working out her own approach to the use of symbols (2). For example Woolf writes in "On not Knowing Greek" that metaphors should be "close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge and make splendid" (Woolf 28) and hereby seems to mean that the metaphors or symbols used should not stray too far from the real thing depicted, or the meaning will be lost. It should, as I understand it, balance carefully on the border between what is apparent and what is obscured in order to have the desired effect of making the reality in question stand out, enhanced.

Furthermore, Woolf thought it important that the intuitive realization that a symbol is meant to give us should be instant "because we start doubting the real and the symbolical if we do not apprehend symbol and meaning simultaneously" (Thakur 3). To put it plainer: we have to understand both the symbol and its meaning straight away for there to be a point in using it, otherwise "we are puzzled as to what we ought to understand" and "this hesitation, she feels, is fatal" (3). Another aspect is that Woolf feels that symbols should evoke and suggest rather than inform. In her diary she partly admits to preparing symbols for specific uses, and then also realizing that the right way of using symbols is to include them as images that do not have to work out a meaning, but only need to suggest (4). Thakur therefore establishes "Virginia Woolf's symbols are aesthetic symbols rationally created to suggest and give insight into the ineffable in human thought and feeling, or to heighten and make splendid the desired emotions and ideas" (4), and furthermore that the symbols "are easy to interpret in

the light of the thoughts and feelings that are available in her literary criticism, diary, and other writings" (4). Whether or not we agree that Woolf's symbols are easy to interpret depends, of course, on the individual.

However, I tend to believe that most readers find it challenging to interpret the symbolism used. This is so for the very reason that they may not have access to Woolf's diary and literary criticism. In fact, even when we do, it shows that Woolf's own theories about the right way to use symbolism are not straight forward. It is likely that even Woolf herself thought it complicated to get the balance just right between symbols that are vague enough to evoke and suggest instead of inform, and at the same time are clear enough to provide us with instant intuitive realization of what they mean. It is difficult even in theory to fully grasp how we could use metaphors in our own writing that are "close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge and make splendid."

Adding to the above mentioned aspects, Woolf, apart from being well aware of the nature of the symbol, also knew how symbols affect our minds. She realized that by putting together pieces of information in the shape of images along with the words you could achieve a fuller picture of understanding. Also Woolf, in *The Common Reader,* explains the technique in which images are repeated on purpose to work on our emotions and become symbolic (Woolf qtd. in Thakur 5). When, for example, ticks and mannerisms of characters repeatedly are reported in the shape of images they hint at something of peoples' personalities and these actions become symbolic (6). In *Mrs. Dalloway* there is an abundance of images and as a reader you enter into a different world through the thoughts, ideas and observations made by the various characters. Instead of using detailed descriptions of people's appearances such as: "He was a short man in his forties with dark hair and glasses. He wore a new, black suit and size 6 brown shoes…" which would have given us a pre-made package of how to view the person, Woolf, in her streams of consciousness narrative method, scatters fragments of images for the readers to gather up and to piece together as to form our own, maybe individual, understanding of the character. Using this technique means that the focus shifts from the appearance and outer details to how the person actually is, thinks and feel on the inside. And this, I think, must have been what Virginia Woolf saw as most important and infinitely more interesting than pure exterior looks.

In one passage in Woolf's essay "On Being Ill," she explains that symbols make us grasp what is beyond the surface and that we by instinct gather up "this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause" and that when all put together they evoke "a state

of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain." So as to sum up; "we need symbols, because words are meager in comparison with ideas" (Woolf qtd. in Thakur 6). This, I think, is a wonderful way to explain how such a complicated process of fragmented images and symbols really fill an important function in Woolf's writing. Taken together, Woolf's thoughts and theories mentioned above show that her use of symbolism certainly is not left to chance, but is planned in detail and that her own approach to the use of symbols is the result of a complex thought process.

## 3. Characters

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) was published during a time when British society was still recovering from World War One. Many people still suffered from loss and mourning and post-war trauma. In spite of having won the war, British society was, of course, very much affected and struggled to find a way back to some sort of normality. People tried to rebuild their lives as best they could but the effects of the war were to be felt for a long time to come. People had not experienced suffering on this scale before and society did not know how to best deal with it. I suppose that everyone knew someone who had died in the war or who had come back a very different man from who he was before the war. New ideas started to circulate and traditional values were questioned. There were different interests at stake, social, political and economic. The ruling class wanted to preserve society the way it was before the war, always having enjoyed certain privileges. The working class had everything to gain from change, for example, the independence of not having to answer to the upper class. And did the role of women also change in this dynamic society? Furthermore, thousands of men who had fought in the war suffered mentally from their experiences and were in need of treatment. Was it possible to rebuild society like it had been before the war or had the war caused society to change permanently? These aspects are necessary to consider as they form a backdrop to Woolf's novel.

Undoubtedly, the difficult post-war times affected Virginia Woolf privately and subsequently affected her writing. She was upset by social injustice and I sense that she was particularly upset by the type of defenselessness that a person can feel when he or she, so to speak, is up against society. She feels that it is man's exploitation of man that causes the suffering and that this exploitation can take place anywhere and be either social, political, economic or religious (Thakur 55). In her diary she writes "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf qtd. in Thakur 55) and so she chose *Mrs. Dalloway* as a channel to put forth her criticism against society.

Noting Woolf's intent to show the intense social system at work, it is important to consider what different roles symbolism have in her writing. I argue that the symbolism in this novel can be divided into two main categories, in terms of function: firstly, symbolism used to put forth social criticism through archetypal characters and secondly, a subtle symbolism used to speak to our senses and subconscious. In my opinion, the characters of the novel serve an extra important function as both structural device in the narrative and as the

main channel for the criticism. Woolf wanted to make her characters into symbolic archetypes in order to show how society lacked in humanity and how people took advantage of each other for personal gain. For this reason I have chosen to study some of the characters in Mrs. Dalloway and their symbolic value. As mentioned earlier, I focus less on Clarissa and Septimus, as these two characters often are the subject of study in literary criticism, and more on some of the surrounding characters and argue that it is mainly through these that Woolf puts forth her criticism of society.

## Positions and Social Standing

One of the first people we are introduced to in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Hugh Whitbread who comes through the park, seemingly on an important errand. Upon seeing him Clarissa thinks, "Hugh – the admirable Hugh!"(Woolf 5). After having greeted Clarissa extravagantly we catch a glimpse of what type of person Hugh is when he starts telling Clarissa of his wife being ill "[…] intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his very well-covered, manly, extremely handsome, perfectly upholstered body (he was almost too well dressed always, but presumably had to be, with his little job at Court)" (Woolf 6). Through the way Woolf lets us see the mannerisms of Hugh when he talks and Clarissa's thoughts about him, we get the picture of an over-dressed somewhat pompous man who likes to think that he is in a high position, doing an important job in circles that count. Hugh appears to swell with pride and contentment for having a position at court but in the eyes of other people he merely seems reduced to an overdressed errand boy. Clarissa thinks of Hugh as an old friend and seems to value his friendship but at the same time he makes her feel inferior, skimpy and schoolgirlish (Woolf 6). Other people that are close to Clarissa, namely her friend Peter Walsh and her husband Richard, on the other hand, loathe him. Richard is said to having been "nearly driven mad by him" and Peter had once uttered that Hugh "had no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners and breeding of an English gentleman" (Woolf 7).

The concept of the English gentleman is something fundamental in the awareness of British people. Looking back in time, and at positive connotations, the gentleman was someone of means, educated and refined, many times worthy of admiration. He naturally stood out from of the mass of the uneducated and poor and perhaps was a symbol for the ideal man. The criticism Woolf puts forth through Hugh appears to concern the tendency that people want to feel important and, more to the point, look important to other people. Maybe she feels that the gentleman concept has lost its value in a time when education started to become more readily accessible and that there was no excuse for people to put on airs and

graces on pretence of being more valuable than other people (especially not because you came from the upper class). Like an inflated, colourful balloon with nothing but air inside, Hugh functions as a symbol of all those who have inherited their social standing and who are protective of their position as it allows them an easy life.

This need to be close to the rich and famous in the early 20th century is something that we now can see has snowballed out of proportion. In Hugh we can see something of today's preoccupation with exterior looks and exaggerated interest in celebrities. Hugh is only interested in what is on the outside: fine clothes, a title and having the right contacts. He brags about his position at court but has no real ambition in his career. Richard, on the other hand, works long hours at parliament to make a difference in society, but appears to receive little recognition for his work. Peter, who is the very opposite to Hugh, cares very little about his own appearance and social standing and is instead consumed by thoughts and emotions. Compared to Richard and Peter, Hugh appears even more pompous and superficial.

In addition, Hugh symbolizes all those in society who feel a yearning to be close to, and also loyal to, powerful people (such as the Queen or the Prime Minister in this novel). This tendency can, it appears, have disastrous effects. People are prepared to do anything for the famous and Thakur argues that this "worship of greatness […] becomes symbolic of the distortion of values which leads to unnatural loyalties, one of the causes of war and its inhuman destruction" (56). It may, at first, seem a little exaggerated to blame the war on Hugh. However, when considering him as symbolic of a crowd of people, who all have given up their own critical thinking in order to be loyal to somebody in power, Hugh's ridiculous persona instead begins to appear potentially sinister.

## Religion to Rule Others

Doris Kilman, a poor spinster passed forty, is the tutor of the Dalloways' daughter Elizabeth. Kilman had wandered into a church a couple of years earlier supposedly very upset and angry about something and had found that "the hot and turbulent feelings which boiled and surged in her had been assuaged"(Woolf 136). The Reverend had told her it was the hand of God that had helped her and ever since she had called herself a Christian. She is introduced early in the novel when Clarissa, who feels distanced from her daughter, ponders that Elizabeth cares more for her dog than for gloves and shoes (which Clarissa feels is regretful). Indeed, the only comforting thought, to Clarissa, is that Elizabeth at least is not like Miss Kilman who, even worse, spends all her time "in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book" (Woolf 12). The picture Woolf draws of religion reduced to reading prayer books in stuffy bedrooms, is certainly a

negative one. With satire she gives us Kilman as a symbol for all the despicable things people sometimes claim to do in the name of religion. For example, Kilman has singled out Clarissa, whom she thinks of as a fool and simpleton, and she feels it is God's will that she should bring Mrs. Dalloway to her knees and humiliate her (Woolf 137). Needless to say, this goes against the Christian message of love and understanding.

Elizabeth's closeness to Miss Kilman is a source of great annoyance to Clarissa who thinks that "religious ecstasy made people callous [and] dulled their feelings" (Woolf 12). Miss Kilman seems to have a way of reaching into Clarissa's innermost core and touching something raw and unprotected there. Clarissa feels criticized for being who she is and caring for what she does, and as we often do when we feel criticized, she reacts with anger. She feels loathing when she thinks about the bitter Miss Kilman who (despite her low social standing) always makes Clarissa feel inferior and who is perpetually dressed in an old, green mackintosh coat.

The coat itself serves as an extension of Kilman and a symbol of religion. Celia Marshik has studied this particular piece of clothing and writes in "The Modern(ist) Mackintosh" that "The mackintosh in modernism sends a warning" to the reader and argues that this, somewhat infamous, garment often is used by writers to signal something negative in their characters (64). Clarissa thinks about "love and religion" as something detestable and she sees them as "clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat" (Woolf 138). Marshik argues that "the range of qualities that Clarissa projects onto Kilman –and specifically onto her coat –points to the latter's repulsive physicality, to Clarissa's upper-class distaste for the unfashionably dressed, and to Kilman's position as Clarissa's rival for Elizabeth's love and attention" (64). I think that Woolf, with her mackintosh-clad Kilman as a symbol, communicates quite clearly to the reader the negative sides of religion. Maybe, it is the aspect of someone forcing their ideas on someone else that is particularly sensitive. Woolf shows how one person feels she has the right to bring another person to her knees and humiliate her, in the name of God. At the same time it becomes obvious what havoc religious extremists can cause in society, if they were to act like Kilman.

## Preserving Social Order

In the previous sections we have seen how Hugh is used symbolically to criticize the gentleman's wish to protect his own privileged social standing and Kilman to criticize those who misuse religion to control others. In a similar way, the two doctors portrayed in *Mrs.*

*Dalloway* are used to channel critique in a related area: the tendency in powerful people to believe it within their rights (and duty) to rule people weaker than themselves. This, in order to preserve social order in the society. Here, Woolf specifically focuses on how exposed and ill-treated those suffering from mental illness really are by the doctors. Central to the plot, therefore, is Septimus, suffering mentally from the trauma of war. Septimus's illness, we understand, recently has developed quite drastically and the doctors of this time were ill equipped to deal with mental illness. Dr. Holmes, a general practitioner, has been Septimus's doctor but Septimus's condition becomes worse; he hallucinates, hears voices and speaks of killing himself. On the day that the novel takes place he is taken by his wife Rezia to see Sir William Bradshaw, a psychiatrist from the upper class. Holmes had told Rezia that there was "nothing whatever seriously the matter with [Septimus] but was a little out of sorts" and that she had to make her husband "take an interest in things outside himself" (Woolf 23). In fact, Holmes recommends that Septimus should play cricket, which is "a nice out-of-door game, the very game for her husband" (Woolf 27) and speaks of porridge-eating as a way to maintain good health (Woolf 100). Holmes, then, on one hand, has told Rezia that there is nothing wrong with Septimus that some sporting activities and healthy eating cannot cure. Bradshaw, on the other hand, sees that Septimus's condition is very serious but lacks the empathy and the ability to connect with him. Septimus tries to communicate his fragmented thoughts but Bradshaw has no interest in hearing him out because he is so sure of himself and of what is best for his patient. He brusquely decides to have Septimus removed to one of his homes to receive the rest cure "rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed. There was a delightful home down in the country where her husband would be perfectly looked after" (Woolf 106). This removal to a home, however, goes against both Rezia and Septimus's wishes and as a result this stressful situation causes Septimus's condition to get even more critical.

In contrast to Septimus, who suffers after the visit, Sir Bradshaw feels quite content with his own way of handling his patient. He says that "he never spoke of 'madness'; he called it not having a sense of proportion" and that whenever a man came into your room threatening to kill himself "you invoke proportion; order rest in bed" (Woolf 108). Woolf writes "Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (109). Bradshaw not only enjoys his position but loves the fact that he can convert people to his way

of thinking and the feeling of power this brings. He feels he does his England a great service, protecting it from threats and upholding order.

Elaine Showalter writes in the introduction to the 1992 edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* that "Woolf reserves her harshest satire for the doctors" (xlii). She argues, "The bluff middle-class Holmes tries to deal with Septimus's anguish by forcing him into the rigid mould of middle-class English masculine conduct" (xlii) and Bradshaw with "his cold and arrogant manner, the style of someone accustomed to give orders, is the one least likely to succeed in the light of Septimus's delusions of persecution" (xlii). Showalter continues, "Woolf's indignant representation of the therapeutic advice Septimus receives from Doctors Holmes and Bradshaw also incorporates her own unhappy experience with doctors" (xli). She had undergone the rest cure herself and had found the isolation and absence of intellectual activity to be a maddening type of therapy (xli). However, Showalter is of the opinion that although the doctors were "tactless, snobbish, patronizing and obtuse" the rest cure probably was the best care available in those days (xlii).

Realizing these limitations in treatment for psychological trauma at the time, it is, nevertheless, interesting to consider what an alternative treatment could have meant to Septimus. In *Virginia Woolf and Trauma* Karen DeMeester argues that Septimus's suicide is a direct result of his inability to communicate his experiences to others and thereby give meaning to those experiences (77). She recognizes that Septimus is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and that trauma survivors tend to structure their lives round a single traumatic event which is relived over and over. When the trauma survivor is stuck in this constant repetition he is unable to move forward toward recovery (79-80). I think it is interesting to note, as the symbolic, archetypal, doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, do the exact opposite to what could have helped Septimus. They refuse to let him talk about his experiences, thoughts and feelings. They do not wish to communicate with their patients at all; on the contrary, they seem to want to silence them. An interesting point, made by DeMeester, is that Septimus, as a war veteran, has potential power, through his story, to criticize the society that sent him and his compatriots to war (83) and that hearing the terrible testimonies by survivors, it was not surprising that the community wished to deny their truths. Therefore, to keep social order intact, it became important to powerful forces, like Bradshaw, to keep Septimus and others like him quiet (84-85). Woolf was not aware of how research within the fields of psychology would help to develop, for example, cognitive behavioral therapy but still managed to identify exactly what was lacking at the time: communication.

DeMeester writes "Woolf's form brilliantly depicts trauma and deftly manifests in art a psychological condition that science failed to understand until half a century and several wars later" (80).

## The Independent Critics

While characters like Hugh, Kilman, Holmes and Bradshaw are used as symbolic archetypes to criticize negative and unwanted aspects of society, there are characters who serve a different function. Peter Walsh, Sally Seton and Septimus Smith, all portrayed as either adventurous or as not behaving in a way that society expects them to do, are not themselves the subject of criticism but work as channels for criticism. As these three are interested in reading literature they represent the type of educated class that might present a threat to people like Bradshaw. Woolf writes that Bradshaw "had worked very hard; he had won his position by sheer ability" and "there was in Sir William, who had never had time for reading, a grudge, deeply buried, against cultivated people who came into his room and intimated that doctors, whose profession is a constant strain upon all the highest faculties, are not educated men" (107).

Two of Clarissa's oldest friends are Sally Seton and Peter Walsh. In her musings, throughout the day of party preparations, Clarissa returns in memory to her summers spent at Bourton as a girl. Sally is portrayed as free-spirited, daring and provoking and she has a special kind of allure that made Clarissa think of her fondly even thirty years later. Sally appears unafraid of breaking with the conventional picture of how a young woman should be and simply did what she felt like doing. She liked to see the reactions of people around her and was not intimidated by people of power. People who opposed this type of unconventional behavior probably thought Sally to be shockingly disrespectful, not knowing how to behave like a lady. Peter was in love with Clarissa and still suffers from her rejection as she chose to marry Richard Dalloway instead. The accumulated picture of Peter through the novel is that he is in touch with his feelings and breaks the traditional image of manliness. He does not seem interested in climbing the social ladder, does not appear too upset about not having written as he once set out to do, not having made a career. He sees himself as a buccaneer and adventurer. He is unimpressed with people like Hugh and with politicians and feels he can see through them. Other characters appear to find him a bit of a social misfit: a drifter and career failure, always in love with someone or in some kind of trouble.

Peter and Sally are able to see through people and it is their critical thinking that sets them apart from other characters in the novel. Maybe they are freer than many others because

they do not worry so much about what people may think of them. Thakur argues that they are ordinary people who are more or less ignored by those of rank and that are declared mad "because they do not follow the proportion of the herd" and that they symbolize a minority of intelligent people who are aware of the shortcomings of modern society (61). Certainly, choosing your own way in life grants you the freedom to ignore convention but may also have its price, perhaps feelings of alienation or exclusion from community.

Another person experiencing alienation in society is, of course, Septimus. Also he is interested in literature, reading Dante and Shakespeare. He had studied before the war, not because it was expected of him but because he wanted to and because it was important to him (Woolf 92) and also had ambitions to write poetry. Suzette A. Henke writes in her article "Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith: An analysis of "Paraphrenia" and the Schizophrenic Use of Language" that Woolf had proposed in her notes for *Mrs. Dalloway* "that her sketch of Septimus was to "be left vague – as a mad person is – not so much character as idea" and that "He must somehow see through human nature – see its hypocrisy, and insincerity" (13). Despite Woolf's suffering from depressions she wrote that she also found her bouts to be creative periods and helped her see visions. She felt that the illness gave rare insight into a different level of consciousness that evaded most people and so one understood more than most, seeing more clearly (Thakur 8, 62).

Septimus has been given this insight. He has visions and hears divine messages where he feels he is selected to find out the secrets of life. He wants to communicate these to the world but does not get the chance as the doctors effectively silence him. To Septimus the doctors symbolize all that is despicable in humans: "Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you" (Woolf 107). So when in despair, hearing Holmes coming up the stairs and closing in on him, he takes his own life. He throws himself out of the window calling out, with some triumph, "I'll give it you!" (Woolf 164). The question is if he is to be seen as a victim, visionary or maybe revolutionary? DeMeester argues that Septimus's choice to end his life may be seen as a revolutionary act that defies the doctors' attempts to repress his wartime experience (88). Henke, on the other hand, offers a different angle: "As the symbolic representative of an authoritarian society, Holmes forces Septimus to choose between the 'freedom' of death and enforced incarceration in a madhouse" (21). Of course, these interpretations may essentially mean the same thing. Septimus is forced to make a choice between life and death; only in the first interpretation he

chooses death because he really wants to communicate his terrible experiences and in the second he chooses death because he refuses to be put into a home.

The three characters of Sally, Peter and Septimus, each in their own way, stand in contrast to the types of persons that Whitbread, Holmes and Bradshaw represent. Throughout the novel the picture builds of these men as being loyal to the crown and England, interested in power and social standing at best. They are depicted as brutes without feeling who are arrogant, domineering and insensitive to human suffering. They are uneducated in literature and uninterested in soul searching. Looking at them this way the characters collectively form a grey impenetrable wall, whilst Septimus, Peter and Sally stand for the free-spirited challengers who have thrown themselves into life with both joys and miseries, letting the stream take them wherever it will.

And where, one may ask, does Clarissa fit in? Is she caught in between, wanting to be free in spirit but safe in body? She lives her inner life as a young, fresh-faced girl, running around the gardens at Bourton, with perpetual summer, fresh air, flowers in bloom, loving and feeling the kinship of Sally and Peter, admiring their spirit and inner strength but fearing that she, Clarissa would not fit in no matter how much she wished. Maybe, she realized that she wanted a simpler kind of life and so settled for Richard, welcoming the structure of their life in London. Going into the role of the *angel in the house* I see it as Clarissa making a safe choice, something she feels that she can manage. She seems to love life in London and all that comes with it, but on a day like the one in the novel, feeling melancholy and thinking of how things could maybe have been different.

Clarissa may not be one of society's visionaries, but has her own visions and spiritual theories. Septimus thinks "Communication is health; communication is happiness" (Woolf 102) and Henke observes that "Though Septimus cannot communicate directly with Holmes and Bradshaw, he does ultimately convey his revolutionary message to another individual, Clarissa Dalloway" who "intuitively understands the private, symbolic 'meaning' of his suicide" (21). Septimus had cried out "I'll give it you!" (Woolf 164) and Clarissa seems to understand his act. Having withdrawn from the party to process what she had found out about the young man who had killed himself Clarissa reflects that "there was an embrace in death" and that Septimus had preserved what mattered (Woolf 202). Maybe, she thinks that there is something life-affirming in his last act; he had after all preserved life, *it*. His life could not be taken from him anymore (by brutes like the doctors), as he had already given it away (to someone who loves life).

# 4. The World of Nature and of Objects

## References to Nature

*Mrs. Dalloway* takes place in London and contrary to what one may at first think there are frequent references made to nature in the scenes from this large city, both to flowers, trees, birds and to scenery, weather conditions and elements such as water and air. The references to nature are made on different levels: describing the actual surroundings in present London, visions through memory and various symbols and metaphors. The references to nature also vary for different characters in the novel. Through Clarissa we often see images of flowers and of summer life at Bourton, to which she repeatedly comes back in her mind. On this June morning in 1923 Clarissa sets out to buy flowers for her party and finds herself drawn back in time by the colours and fragrances of the flower shop. As she lets her eyes sweep over the delphiniums, sweet peas, and masses of carnations she breathes in the "earthy garden sweet smell […] the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness" (Woolf 13) and memories from her girlhood summers at Bourton come before her eyes. The beauty of the flowers soothes her previously upset state of mind "nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour […] were a wave which she let flow over her" (Woolf 14). With these images the flower shop seems like an island and refuge in the midst of the city and Clarissa's soothing chant and breathing in of flower scent works as a meditation to calm her and focus on happier thoughts.

There are, of course, different ways to look at nature symbolism, for example, the rather direct approach Thakur uses to explain how the state of Clarissa's girlhood is externalized by the fresh, calm and still early morning air at Bourton, and that surroundings and time of day also are symbolic. The early morning is a symbol of Clarissa's youth and the trees and flowers represent her aspirations towards a rosy, budding life. The rooks that she sees rising and falling are symbols of the rising and falling emotions that she was feeling for Peter (Thakur 65). Coming back to the flower shop, that worked like a refuge for Clarissa, there are other places depicted or hinted at in the novel that give different characters peace when they think about them. For example, Rezia, desperately unhappy upon understanding that Septimus is dead, lets her mind wander to the gardens of Italy. Sally and Clarissa as well as Richard also think of their respective gardens and country retreats when they long for quiet and calmness (Thakur 65).

However, Clarissa's visions of nature are not all of this peaceful kind. Upon realizing that Lady Bruton had asked her husband Richard to lunch without her Clarissa feels "as a

plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered" (Woolf 32). When Clarissa feels the loathing for Miss Kilman seep through her she thinks "It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul" (Woolf 13).

Such rich and poetic language shows how effectively images can carry meaning that goes beyond words and right into us. Moreover, Henke writes about symbolism in written language as a way to let a person suffering from mental disorder communicate his thoughts and feelings to readers. Through the method of stream of consciousness we can see in pictures what Septimus otherwise could not communicate to us in words. Henke writes that "Virginia Woolf suffered all her life from a sense of personal fragmentation" and that Woolf had a "sense of duality, and of a consciousness divided between 'fact and vision', mania and depression, a mystical conviction of organic wholeness and an isolated feeling of alienation and dread" (13). She made use of this experience in her portrayal of Septimus. When Septimus is waiting in the park for his appointment with Bradshaw he has visions and feels connected with the trees. He believes that "the human voice […] can quicken trees into life […] leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibers with his own body […] when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement" (Woolf 24). The sounds and visions taken together, that morning in the park, meant the birth of a new religion to him (Woolf 24). He thinks "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God" and when he hears sparrows sing to him in Greek (Woolf 26) he is convinced that he has been "called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth [and that this] supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first, that trees are alive; next, there is no crime; next, love, universal love" (Woolf 74). In this way, letting fragmented images speak, we can sense something of what Septimus is experiencing and how complicated his world of reference is. The imagery indicates that Septimus, like Woolf, is convinced of a mystical, organic wholeness and that he feels a part of cosmos.

This mystical wholeness is also what brings together the two main characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Jackson writes that "the novel pointedly connects Septimus and Clarissa in many ways, through shared phrases, imagery and actions" but that they "differ from each other significantly with respect to their sense of self" (131). What he seems to mean is that Clarissa has a clear sense of who she is, and Jackson calls it "a modernist recognition of subjectivity", that Septimus lacks (131). When Clarissa thinks of herself as "being laid out like a mist

between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist (Woolf 10) she recognizes her thought as a symbolic likeness. When Septimus, on the other hand, feels that his body is connected to the trees by millions of fibres and stretched with the movement of the branches (Woolf 24), he does not recognize this as symbolic but feels it is real. Jackson words it; "he has merged (in his own mind at least) with the natural world around him […] he appears to have become metaphorically *identical* with the trees" (131).

It can be seen from the above analysis that nature symbolism can have different functions and operate on different levels, from describing actual surroundings to being part of the inner landscape of a person's mind. My view is that the most important function that this symbolic imagery has is to speak to our senses and subconscious through pictures rather than through regular narrative. Using nature and elements as images and metaphors, can start thought processes triggered by our senses. This is where the actual subtlety lies in this novel's stream of consciousness, the way Woolf makes fragmented images and words work together and by doing so, imitate how our minds work.

## Objects and Actions of Symbolic Value

Often when the term symbolism is mentioned it may be objects as symbols that first of all spring to mind. The idea that a tangible object should have a particular meaning is something that is easy to grasp. In *Mrs. Dalloway* one such object is Peter's pocket-knife. There are several different theories about the meaning of Peter's knife. Showalter writes "Constantly fiddling with the pocket-knife which symbolizes his masculinity, Walsh fantasizes about sexual adventures, and even follows women in the streets" (xiv). Alternatively, the knife can also symbolize Peter's different feelings and becomes a visual image and extension of his thoughts. When Peter for example reflects on Clarissa's choice of husband he feels irritated and shuts "the knife with a snap" (Woolf 44). Another time he compares his own life to Clarissa's. Her life seems to have gone on unchanged in comfort while he has been through various adventures in India. Upon this reflection Peter "took out his knife quite openly […] and clenched his fist upon it"(Woolf 47). Later when he tries to understand why he had been so emotional and thinks that it is jealousy that "survives every other passion of mankind" he holds "his pocket-knife at arm's length" (Woolf 88), only to, moments later, conclude that Clarissa could have spared him a lot of suffering if she had only married him, shutting his pocket-knife thinking that women "don't know what passion is" (Woolf 88).

Another object that carries symbolic meaning, both in itself and in the actions connected with it, is Clarissa's green dress that she plans to wear to her party. She goes up to her room and as she looks at herself in the mirror she purses her lips to give her face point "That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together" (Woolf 40). It appears that Clarissa puts on a sort of show and radiance for the benefit of people who come to visit her. She "had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her – faults, jealousies, vanities" (Woolf 40).

These thoughts about her looks and ways lead her to go and look for her evening dress. She "gently detached the green dress and carried it to the window. She had torn it. Some one had trod on the skirt […] By artificial light the green shone, but lost its colour now in the sun. She would mend it. […] She would wear it to-night." (Woolf 41). Clarissa sits down in midst of the preparations for the party and sends silent thanks to her servants "for helping her to be like this, to be what she wanted, gentle, generous-hearted" (Woolf 42). As she starts to mend her dress she feels "calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt" (Woolf 43). The very action of the needle like "on a summer's day waves collect, over-balance, and fall; collect and fall", soothes Clarissa, "and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all"…fear no more" (Woolf 43). Clarissa takes out the dress to look at in the daylight the same way as one might at times examine oneself in the mirror to find one's true self. She sees that the dress is torn and maybe this is a metaphor for Clarissa feeling scarred in some way. Who has "trodden" on her and inflicted the scar we do not know. It may be the way she felt slighted and jealous "like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch" (Woolf 40) or it may be feelings or memories from the past.

Thakur argues that in her effort to hide the not so flattering parts of her personality and by "appearing to be gentle and generous, there is something artificial, something tinselly" and that the green dress "that shines in artificial light but loses colour in the sun, becomes a suggestive symbol of the 'perfect hostess'" (70). An alternative reading could be that Clarissa appears (to others) to be herself in the artificial light but she knows this is only a false front, a façade. The dress becomes a symbol of Clarissa's personality. Her party is like a stage where she is allowed to shine, radiantly in the spotlight. She acts a part and likes it. However, were she to step down from the stage and take off her costume she might be afraid to be caught out as no one special, and not measure up to the picture others have of her as a radiant person.

As we have seen, tangible objects, such as Peter's knife and Clarissa's dress can, of course, be used as symbols, however, it is not so much the actual objects as the actions described in connection with these, that are interesting. When Clarissa looks at her dress it is not the fabric that she sees, but herself, in an introspective moment. Like the dress, she has flaws, but she also sees the good qualities. The image of Clarissa sewing, with repetitive movements of the hand, signals growing harmony within her. The ways in which Peter handles his knife: looks at it, clenches his fist upon it and thrusts it in his pocket, indicate his general frame of mind and betrays his feelings for Clarissa in a far more true-to-life way than words in regular narrative could do. In fact, what Woolf does with her images, is to imitate how, in real life, we subconsciously and constantly try to decode each other's body language, in order to gain information about the other person's thoughts and feelings.

## 5. Conclusion

While symbolism previously had been used to add mysticism to various works of literature, Virginia Woolf used symbolism not only a way to enrich the writing and create an added layer of interest, but as a tool to structure her novel. Woolf wanted to find a narrative shape that suited her and through experimenting with streams of consciousness, fragmentation and careful plotting she could both avoid materialistic descriptions and find a suitable way to incorporate her own experiences. Primarily, as in any story, rich descriptive language, saturated in adjectives, serves the purpose of describing the characters and settings to us quite openly and, so to speak, set the framework of the storyline. On a deeper level, though, the symbols speak to us subconsciously.

Woolf wanted her symbolism to balance carefully on the border between what is apparent and what is obscured, in order to have the desired effect of enhancing the narrative. She also thought it important that the realization of both the symbol used and of what it was representing should be instant. It would, of course, be interesting to know how deep the understanding of the symbolism was among Woolf's so-called common readers at the time of first publication and if the way in which she used symbolism had the desired effect. Would it, then, be possible for a person to read the novel without prior understanding of symbolism? The answer is, of course, yes, even though this may result in very different readings depending on the individual. However, to be able to appreciate the subtle signals that the symbolism communicates to our senses it often takes several readings. You need a trained eye and, a more than basic, awareness of symbolism to be able to read between the lines and appreciate the fine and intricate shades of meaning. Therefore the question if Woolf wanted everyone to grasp the meaning on this level, or if it was meant for a chosen few, here remains unanswered.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* there is a difference between the symbols used in terms of category and function. On the one hand, there are the characters used to structure the novel. This category, I have argued, is the most important one for the understanding of Woolf's criticism of a society that she thought superficial. On the other hand there are the references to nature and the use of different objects symbolically. These categories are maybe equally important, but on a different level, as they serve to add subtle feelings and reflect people's emotions, frames of mind and unspoken thoughts. Consequently, these different types of symbolism are at play simultaneously in the novel; they are intertwined. We get both the framework of the archetypal characters that are used symbolically and the rich imagery to help us visualize

what goes on in people's minds. By piecing together the loose images that Virginia Woolf has scattered before us we gradually build our understanding of the different characters. Flowers and gardens may say something about Clarissa being naïve and shallow in focusing on the beautiful things in life such as parties and being preoccupied with reminiscing about her youth, but also suggest that there is a spiritual side to her. The nature references that surround Septimus have the function to make us understand the intricate workings of his mind and confused state. We start to understand things about their personalities that would be difficult to sum up in a few sentences. The symbolism works in a way as to say in pictures what cannot be expressed in words. The visions offered through symbolism open up new possibilities for us to understand layers of meaning. We are exposed to the visual surroundings of the novel through the different characters and we experience the inner landscape of their minds. In the novel we listen in on the characters' streams of consciousness; we see the world through their eyes.

Could Woolf ever have foreseen her texts still being read and critiqued about hundred years after they were published? Of course, the world has vastly changed since the time of publishing, in terms of acting as a canvas for how we may understand things differently now to then. However, I believe Woolf's creative imagery still speaks to us through our senses. We can see through our inner vision, hear the sounds, feel the touch; we can nearly feel the fragrances of flowers and taste the city life. Furthermore, the symbolism is indeed a vital part of this novel, without which communicating central views and ideas to the reader would not have been possible.

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